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SUBJECT: PRT LASHKAR GAH: ENSURING STABILITY IN BABAJI

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) On March 22, Afghan National Security Forces, with ISAF support, initiated an operation that cleared a Taliban enclave close to the provincial center of Lashkar Gah (the "Babaji region"). Following the operation, local Afghans expressed what the Helmand Task Force and PRT generally take as genuine support for the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) and ISAF. This is backed by reports of a proclamation of support from a local shura. The Afghan National Army (ANA) was well received by the local populace, while the Afghan National Police (ANP) force was accused of various forms of predation. Locals did not report a humanitarian crisis after the operation; rather, they offered a familiar wish list of reconstruction projects (road, school and clinic construction). Bringing lasting stability to the Babaji region would create a contiguous development zone consisting largely of the two districts of Lashkar Gah and Nahri Sarraj.

Establishing a legitimate and sustainable security environment, however, will prove a challenge, given the limitations of the ANP. It is imperative that the GOA, with PRT assistance, swiftly introduce reconstruction projects into the area and also show a more positive GOA face than that of the local ANP. To that end, the PRT is working with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development to quickly deliver select projects, including road reconstruction. END SUMMARY

Winning Consent After "Babaji" Operation

12. (SBU) On March 22, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), with assistance from ISAF, launched an operation in an area some ten kilometers from the provincial seat of Lashkar Gah, described as the "Babaji region" after one of the villages in the area. This operation, according to ISAF, was designed to put pressure on Taliban extremists, foreign fighters, and their narco-trafficking criminal associates who

have operated within the general population in communities north of Lashkar Gah. Having forced Taliban elements out of the area, the Government of Afghanistan (GOA), ISAF and the PRT have undertaken to stabilize the area and secure the support of the populace.

Locals Claim and Proclaim Support for the GOA

13. (SBU) Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of an operation displacing Taliban elements, elders from the Babaji region have proclaimed their support for the GOA in recent meetings with Helmand Task Force (HTF) and PRT representatives. HTF recon teams that visited the area following the operation also report that local Afghans in the area expressed support for the GOA and ISAF, which they deemed generally genuine, despite their general propensity to agree with whatever forces are in control. More unusual is the report from local Afghan sources of similar sentiments proclaimed in an Afghan-only shura on March 31, when an estimated 500 tribal and religious elders from the area met to discuss the recent operation and its implications. They apparently took note of the fact that locals (in particular women and children) and their property have suffered significantly whenever the GOA and the Taliban clash. Those assembled decided and declared that anyone whose son or brother had joined the Taliban should convince him to renounce and return to live a normal life. Failure to renounce would lead to the local Taliban being forcibly expelled from the village, and any house associated with anti-GOA or pro-Taliban activity in the region would be burned.

It's Not Humanitarian Assistance They Need Most...

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14. (SBU) Despite the elders' references in the March 29 meeting to losses to persons and property from GOA-Taliban fighting, in meetings with the PRT and provincial officials and in HTF recon trips, locals failed to note any humanitarian concerns or battle damage stemming from the operation. Rather, they have pointed to a familiar list of reconstruction projects, e.g., road reconstruction, canal cleaning, and school and clinic construction.

... But a Government That Will Not Mistreat or Ignore Them

15. (SBU) In meetings with HTF and PRT representatives, local elders have complained about the activities of the Afghan National Police (ANP) following the operation. They have reported illegal searches, looting, and other instances of intimidation and abuse. Many locals in the area have heaped praise on the Afghan National Army (ANA) and scorn on the ANP. Local concerns undoubtedly have been heightened by the departure of the more-trusted ANA from the area. The provincial Police Chief has acknowledged these allegations and promised to investigate. Another potential problem is the provincial director of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), who elders say is unwilling to assist them, as they claim he is pro-Taliban (the director has held the position for roughly the last ten years).

COMMENT

16. (SBU) A stable and secure "Babaji region" will result in the linkage of two key areas of the Helmand "Aghan Development Zone," i.e., the districts of Lashkar Gah and Nahri Sarraj into one contiguous area. The positive reception and perception of the GOA and ISAF can only be maintained and reinforced if the GOA can provide effective and legitimate security, which has proven difficult given apparent ANP misdeeds. The HTF and PRT have increasingly raised the possibility of mentoring for ANP in the area,

along the lines of that provided to the ANA. There are no quick fixes for the ANP, however, so it is imperative that tangible reconstruction and development projects be implemented soon. In addition, given that the ANP is often the only face of the GOA presented in districts, it is likewise important that other provincial institutions play a role in ensuring stability in the area. The PRT is looking to establish regular contacts in the area to manage local expectations and also at ways to initiate select reconstruction projects swiftly, such as road reconstruction.

The PRT has noted some positive responses from MRRD in pursuing reconstruction projects, which could introduce another positive GOA actor into locals' lives.

WOOD